

"Federation Corner" column
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In praise of vintage neighborhoods

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Vintage is all the rage: vinyl records are selling again as are vintage-inspired clothes, home decor, furnishings, and design. At the same time, the historic preservation movement is beginning to address postwar buildings ranging from Usonian-inspired modern homes to the commercial exuberance of Doo Wop and Boogie. (As the Doo Wop Preservation League website proclaims, "It's Cool! It's Hip! It's Retro! It's Wildwood!")

So let me predict the next big style craze: *vintage suburbs*. I'm talking about the inner ring suburbs, begun in the thirties but primarily filled out in the mid-twentieth century. To my mind, these neighborhoods combine some of the best features of urban and suburban living, while avoiding the excesses of either extreme.

A short distance from urban centers, vintage suburbs offer a variety of commuting options, unlike the sprawling, car-dependant suburbs that came later. Small lot sizes and proximity to neighborhood shopping, parks, and schools promote neighbor to neighbor interaction, enhance walkability and provide urban convenience. At the same time, however, mature trees and green space provide a peaceful ambiance, kids have yards to play in, and there's space for gardens, decks, and Florida rooms. One has both urban bustle and quiet retreat.

Many of these communities were developed a few houses at a time, leading to a diversity of housing styles and sizes. This stylistic diversity created an eclectic visual character, which contrasts starkly with the monotony of both the tract-mansion developments and the cookie-cutter mixed use developments which are prevalent today. For example, the only place I've ever seen houses with round screened-in front porches is Woodmoor.

The variety of available housing also means that students, growing families, and empty-nesters can all be accommodated in the same neighborhood. It is hard to convey how much cultural richness this age diversity provides. I treasure the friendships I've made across the age spectrum in my neighborhood; I have learned from young and old alike. It has been a special joy to watch children grow as they participate in community life; from their first steps "helping" with a cleanup or tree planting to their adult pursuit of careers that enhance others' lives.

In fact, some of these developments were actually designed to include housing stock for a range of economic levels, and others were specifically designed to be affordable for first-time home-buyers. Indeed, some of these communities are still among the most affordable in the county.

This affordability also enhances diversity, enabling older residents to "age in place" while providing many immigrants their first chance to buy a home. This housing resource will become all the more important as the current rush to build tract mansions, luxury condos, and expensive town homes further skews the housing market away from affordability.

There is history here as well. In my neighborhood, Northwood Four Corners, we have the 1939 World's Fair House, as well as homes built by the first member-run housing cooperative in the state of Maryland. In 1951 a group of mainly Jewish federal workers founded Northwood Park Housing, Inc.,

and bought 10 acres of land. The cooperative designed and built 44 homes, four of which continue to be occupied by their original owners.

However, I think what I like best about the vintage suburbs are their human scale. They are cozy without being crowded. You are not dwarfed either by huge estate homes or high rises. Instead, they have more of a “village” feel.

Since these communities possess many of the attributes planners are ostensibly striving to promote (diversity, walkability, sense of place) you would think the county would be working to preserve them and help them thrive into the future. However, nothing could be farther from the truth.

Instead, they are being treated as obstacles to get around; mere speed bumps in the way of the current fad for ultra-high density development and sprawl-enabling long-distance transit schemes. To my mind, this is every bit as short-sighted as was the “urban renewal” movement and the paving over of many urban neighborhoods for freeways.

Thus, I predict that in the future, those vintage suburbs that survive obliteration will be “discovered” as the new cool place to live. But why wait? You too can be in the vanguard of the next wave: go vintage!

The views expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect formal positions adopted by the Federation. To submit an 800-1000 word column for consideration, send as an email attachment to the montgomerycivic@yahoo.com